

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACADEMIC SUPPORT:

A comparison of the motivations of a Chinese international student and his instructor

JesAlana Stewart

Indiana University, Bloomington

Abstract:

The foremost resource in helping non-native students to navigate western academia is the teacher. Therefore, this study attends to the expectations of an English composition teacher and his Chinese international student through a comparative analysis of their perspectives and strategies. This research finds many commonalities of expectations between the two, and a few dissimilarities, which affect motivation. Additionally, it discovers coping strategies used by the student to meet teacher expectations and strategies used by the instructor to help the student meet expectations. Finally, this study calls for more research into the available resources for internationals, and more training for teachers.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACADEMIC SUPPORT:

A comparison of the expectations of a Chinese international student and his instructor

1. Introduction

With the vast number of international students, primarily Chinese, coming to American universities for higher education purposes, it is essential that these students be provided with the means necessary to succeed. This can indeed be a very difficult task, when often times the struggles of this population goes unknown. Those who are aware of these challenges are the instructors. Teachers know their students' individual motivations and are essentially the first line of defense in providing assistance in coping with a western academic rhetorical system. They should understand the challenges that these particular students experience as non-native speakers (NNS) of English and how this may lead to their disenfranchisement. Finally, in providing different strategies for these students to build self-motivation and to use as a means of meeting the academic expectations that they now find themselves in, teachers are providing a compensatory service both for their students and the university. Therefore, it becomes imperative to analyze the various types of expectations that teachers have and that student's face, along with the different coping and motivational strategies that student's use or teachers suggest, as a means of gaging what additional services may still be needed.

2. Literature Review

Many researchers have discussed the difficulties that students encounter when they are learning in a system that is not their native/first/heritage language, particularly when the native language and educational language are as drastically different as Chinese and English (Kingston & Forland, 2008; Andrade, 2006; Wong, 2003; Shaughnessy,

1976). Additionally, Wong Fillmore's (1991) research has been a catalyst for many subsequent studies of English Language Learners (ELLs) and the challenges they face, particularly when discussing strategies that combat inherent pressures of the context that they are in. These authors all agree to some degree about the many difficulties that these students experience due to cultural, rhetorical, or learning style differences. Topics such as the cultural expectations of personal space or participation, the varying organization of writing or the perception of intellectual property, and the expectation of learning in a teacher centered versus student centered classroom, are all differences that these students face in their new educational setting that may begin to weigh a student down and affect levels of motivation. Several scholars have also attended to how students use motivation to cope with these challenges (Purdie & Oliver, 1999; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Dörnyei & Scott, 1997). Chowdury and Phan Le Ha respond to these authors stating, "It is equally important to investigate the extent to which international students appropriate, resist or reconstitute the dominant discourse exercised in such education" (2014).

Beyond what researchers have stated about the students and their means of understanding and coping with the academic discourse that they are in contact with, scholars have also discussed the teacher's perspective. Shaughnessy explained that many teachers may lack motivation and have "fatalistic views about many of their students' difficulties" (1977). Sook Lee and Oxelson had similar findings. However, there are many instructors who view their position of teaching international students English composition as the most rewarding job possible. Typically, these educators not only give additional help to the international students outside of class but they also change their

professional ethos during class to fit the context and adapt to the needs of teaching international students (Duff & Uchida, 1997; Mawhinney & Xu, 1997).

These teachers do everything in their power to assist students in building self-motivation, despite the lack of resources in how to do so. Due to this need, there have been a growing number of scholars who discuss ways to help these instructors to teach their students. Researchers such as Ulla Connor (2011) and Suresh Canagarajah (2013) remind teachers that the dominant English discourse can lead to the disenfranchisement of their students, they also discuss strategies for teachers to employ in order to facilitate the education of international students. These authors agree that the current teaching practices for these students are insufficient, and they agree that the interactions between teachers (particularly instructors of English composition) and international students (of a Chinese heritage) can be a highly sensitive topic. However, they differ on how to move forward with and adapt a methodological approach for instruction. Connor believes that students must be taught a form of Standard English, while Canagarajah suggests that students should have their own personal rhetoric.

Finally, few studies look at the interactions between the English composition instructor and the international student at the ground level. This type of research would help to better understand the converging expectations and various coping mechanisms that effect motivation on both sides. These expectations span topics from the quality of work and level of participation of the student expected by the teacher to the anticipated grade of the student and expected role of his teacher in providing that evaluation. Additionally, it is imperative to view the types of motivation that are successful in tandem with those that are not, in order to highlight effective coping strategies to improve

such motivation. Therefore, this study attends to this gap in the literature by researching the following questions:

- a. Are teacher expectations and student expectations similar or divergent? How does this affect motivation?
- b. What coping strategies do international students use to overcome academic difficulties in order to meet the expectations of the teacher?

3. Theoretical Framework

Due to the acceptance of the American research culture as representative of an international culture, academia has fallen into the assumption that one methodology does in fact fit all. It is understood, for example, that methodological tools such as interviews, questionnaires, and observations, function in all contexts. However, this ethnocentrism is both counterintuitive and damaging towards the internationalization of methodology (Gobo, 2011). Having said that, there is a long road ahead before these forced methodologies can be adapted or replaced to suit each research contexts needs. Therefore, while I understand that this framework comes from a primarily western perspective of research, I do also acknowledge that recognition is the first step in broadening this study's horizons.

This research applies Grounded Theory as described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) to help code the information gathered. This framework enabled this research to bring forth the most salient information from the data collected in order to construct common threads and include important correlations between the motivations and expectations of the two participants and their subsequent coping strategies. Additionally, it helped to find results that were consistent with the findings of Hofstede (1986) when

looking at the differences of teacher and student expectations in their interactions and how this impacts motivation. Finally, there were also important correlations with the work of Purdie and Oliver (1998), with regard to the coping strategies used by the student participant.

4. Methodology

Over the course of a semester, a qualitative classroom ethnography was conducted in the form of two case studies. One participant, Mr. O, is a freshman English composition instructor to international students at a large Midwestern university. The second participant, Tony, is an international student in Mr. O's class from the People's Republic of China (PRC). In order to properly triangulate all data gathered, multiple forms were collected. Both participants were willing to be observed during class time, to be interviewed, and to provide certain classroom artifacts. Tony gave the researcher multiple versions of his course assignments, along with explanations of his work; Mr. O provided assignments, and comments on Tony's papers. Field notes were taken during classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, questions were developed in advance, however, additional questions and prompts were asked to clarify. Moreover, all interviews went through a rigorous process of member checks.

5. Participants

Mr. O is the instructor of one section of English composition dedicated to international students at a large Midwestern university during the fall of 2014. He is an American graduate student working towards his PH.D. in literature with a focus on the medieval period. His enthusiasm is apparent both within and outside the classroom, and

is an integral part of his student centered teaching pedagogy. It is through his ‘support at all costs’ mentality that he has constructed a community of writing for the students in his course. He hopes that through this support and his motivational attitude towards teaching, the students will consider both the writing that they do and the course as fun.

Tony is a student of Mr. O. He is a 19-year-old freshman from the PRC. Before coming to the Midwestern university, he studied at an American high school for two years. Prior to his American school system experience, he studied two years in a Chinese high school. He felt that his American education was similar to boarding school in the sense that it prepared him for an American college, and he attributed those years to his success in both the university and Mr. O’s course. He is a very charismatic and motivating person with big ideas and an outgoing personality to broadcast them. This gregarious personality led to his volunteering for this research.

6. Outcomes

This research attempts to understand the various interactions at play between Mr. O and his Chinese international student, Tony. This involves multiple kinds of interactions, spanning from in-class discussion to office hour and lunch hour conversations, in addition to written communication. Thus several essential themes emerged in the data from each of these interactional spaces. First and foremost, the motivations and expectations of both the teacher and the student were crucial to their interactions, whether these expectations were explicitly acknowledged or implicitly understood. Additionally, these interactions hinged on whether or not the motivations and expectations of both participants coincided with the perceptions of the other. Once the participants made explicit their motivations and mediated their expectations, several

ensuing strategies appeared in order to negotiate how to better meet these expectations and to cope with the difficulties inherent in the course. Therefore, the emergent threads of this research are as follows: teacher explicit motivations, student explicit motivations, student implicit motivations, teaching strategies to help the student build motivation, student coping strategies to meet expectations.

6.1. Teacher Explicit Motivations:

The teacher motivations are the guiding force in nearly any classroom. Mr. O's English composition course is no exception. The explicit expectations that Mr. O has of his students range in topic from participation in class to their abilities of writing in English which lead to his motivations for student success in his course. These expectations were either stated directly to students in class, to Tony in lunch hours, conveyed in writing, or stated in an interview but were also displayed in student-teacher interactions. For example, Mr. O is motivated by his belief that students need help particularly in arranging their concepts logically. He states, "They need help organizing their own ideas", which was a topic discussed in a class that was observed.

One of the most prevalent motivations in Mr. O's course hinged upon his belief that the writing process should be enjoyable. Thus he explicitly conveys to his students, "The closer we can get that elevator pitch down on paper, the more fun it will seem, because I usually come from the perspective of 'This paper better be fun for everybody, including the person writing it.' If it's not, then obviously something has happened." This is consistent with his desire to support and motivate his own students in whatever topic of interest that they choose to write about over the course of the semester, and is also evident in what Hofstede (1986) signifies as a trait of teaching that stems from student

motivation where “students choose academic subjects in view of intrinsic interest.” Mr. O states, “I have adopted a *Dead Poet Society* mentality of support at all costs, where regardless of what the student is working on, we can find something...So I find that if I can give any encouragement at all about a topic that usually suffices.”

Another explicit motivation comes from the requirements that are inherent in his position, which include teaching western academic expectations. These restrictions on his teaching motivate him to explain to students the staunch differences of and dangers of plagiarism in American academia. In class, he guided his students as an academic ambassador by not only explaining “what it means when you are using outside sources as a way of enhancing your analysis, ... (but also by stating) if you end up saying ‘well I’ve shaved half an hour off my assignment.’ Then you’ve probably plagiarized.” Mr. O excels at simplistic descriptions of complicated concepts because, as he states “I find that the more jargon I throw at the students, the less they understand about the assignment.” Mr. O therefore associates with the weak uncertainty avoidance societies where “a good teacher uses plain language” (Hofstede, 1986).

Beyond his motivation to teach academic conventions, he also explicitly uses journals as a means of motivating his students to not only grow in their writing, but also to maintain a physical and tactile dimension to their work, which builds muscle memory. Mr. O is adamant about his motivations to have a “tactile interference”, since this helps students to not only work through their topics, but to remember them. Purdie and Oliver (1999) suggest that like Mr. O, “It is possible that teachers may be encouraging students, either explicitly or implicitly, to use memory-related strategies more than other, possibly

more effective, strategies in the classroom.” However, Mr. O explicitly defends his motivations for using such methods in his own classroom.

I’ll tell you what it gives me a lens into; it gives me a lens into their writing capabilities! You can’t fake it when you are writing in pen. I have the one student who can just fill up the entire page with all the writing, and then I’m like ‘oh well obviously her writing skills or his writing skills are really awesome.’ Then I have the one student who can write five lines on a single paper because they are so disjointed and scrolly. I know that that is an imperfect measurement of a student’s capability of writing, and a lot of students are so used to typing now that writing has become a bygone art. I think that especially as we are getting closer to a sort of the continuum of having everything essentially either voice-activated or even tablet writing activated online, we are actually coming back to the point where the physical act of doing something is the best way to create a learning space inside the brain.

6.3. Student Explicit Motivations:

Many of the interactional differences on the part of the students, which were introduced by Hofstede (1986), were also seen in this research. For example, the differences between a collectivist society (like China) and an individualist society (like America) were evident in Mr. O’s course. Chinese students would “only speak up in class when called upon personally by the teacher”, and American students would “speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher”; many students would allow other, more Americanized students to dominate conversation in this setting. Tony, in particular, was one of the students who, due to his extended period of time in the United

States and high level of self-motivation, had become much more Americanized and felt comfortable to “speak up in large groups.”

Tony shared Mr. O’s motivation for the class to have a degree of fun to it. When asked what the hardest part of writing was, Tony’s response was “(When) I’m not interested, this is the hardest part.” This statement expresses a lack of motivation or disinterest. Additionally, when asked about the role of his instructor Tony shared that Mr. O is supposed to “make it fun and offer guidance.” However, it was also made clear to Mr. O that one of the most important motivations that not only Tony has, but that all of his students have, is the all important role of getting good grades. “The first thing (Tony) really asked me was ‘What grade would you give it?’”

6.4 Student Implicit Motivations:

This research also found surprising data in relationship to the the motivations of power, as discussed in Hofstede (1986). For example, large power distance societies (such as China) will put emphasis on “personal ‘wisdom’ which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru)”, which in the case of Mr. O and Tony led to a disparity in expectations and motivations from the student, of his teacher. Tony stated, “I mean he hasn’t gotten a PH.D. He hasn’t gotten a professor title yet. I think that’s a shame.” This indicated that although Tony appreciates his instructor and enjoys the course, implicitly he believes that he is not receiving “wisdom” from Mr. O due to his lack of title and younger age leading to a decline in his motivation. This of course was an implicit expectation that Tony never explicitly stated to Mr. O.

While Hofstede’s research did note the importance of respect of a teacher in large power distance societies, it did not discuss an intriguing outcome found in this research

where the student participant views the teacher as a paid resource. Tony stated, “I mean I pay tuition. Why don’t I go find my AI or go for my instructor (for additional help)?” This idea of money as a source of motivation and education as a business exchange was one of the more surprising discoveries of this investigation. Furthermore, whereas Hofstede does discuss that “students admire friendliness in teachers” it does not touch on how the student opinion of the teacher may affect the level of motivation that the student has for any one course. Tony says “I heard people suffer on that (English composition) class a lot, some of my Chinese friends (have)... but I don’t think that’s the same case for me, because I like my instructor.” Due to his status of affection for his instructor leading to a higher motivation for the course, he does not believe he should worry about “suffering”.

6.5 Teaching Strategies:

Mr. O does use various motivational strategies inherent in his teaching pedagogy to help all of his students, including Tony, to succeed in not only meeting his expectations and to build self-motivation but also in meeting the expectations of a western academic context.

Beyond using technology in the classroom Mr. O also teaches his students valuable study habits and strategies for college. For example, he teaches them a gamifying tactic of "setting up proper rewards for studying", which builds interest and motivation for doing well in the course. He explains this technique by first asking the students “what do you do after you finish studying?” They were like ‘I dunno, I usually sleep or I watch TV or something like that.’ (Then he asks) ... when you just finished studying, have any of you given yourselves ice cream?” By teaching his students this

tactic, he hopes to make the whole learning process a little more enjoyable and will inherently build student motivation.

He stresses to his students the importance of perseverance. He says, “that whole see it through mentality is something that is really important to get in the students’ head.” He encourages all of his students to stick with their topic, not only through multiple revisions of a paper, but also through several iterations of a topic seen in many papers through out the course. In writing about the same topic in different genres in the class, students are able to present a full portfolio of work upon completion of the semester. This idea of finishing work that spanned a semester gives students a sense of completion, which can also build self-motivation, and teaches them how to push their own thoughts and definitions. This concept that Mr. O has instilled was seen in both face-to-face interactions between the participants and in written commentaries. Mr. O has stated that he’s been “pushing” and “needling” Tony to really focus in on his concepts and see this topic through to the end.

This kind of motivation and encouragement has not only helped Tony to improve his writing, but it has also steered him towards become a student leader. He has taken the suggestions of his teacher and in turn become a type of “subsidiary teacher or tutor, with other students”, according to Mr. O. This kind of interaction not only helps Mr. O to conduct his class in a more efficient way, it also does a great deal of good for the other students receiving more one-on-one attention and for Tony who is learning new ways to engage with his classmates. Mr. O states, “he has actually been helping a lot of other people with their writing, and it’s been helping his.”

Finally, particularly with Tony, Mr. O has used humor as a means of creating a consistently motivational classroom atmosphere. Take, for example, this interaction between Tony and his instructor:

T- You're going to wait until the end to call on me, aren'tcha?! (He smirks.)

O- Yes I am.

T- That's okay, I'm fine with that!

In this example, Mr. O has built a conducive learning environment by motivating students to be individuals and to feel comfortable to speak up in class, even in a jovial manner, which is precisely what Canagarajah (2013) and Connor (2011) advocate. Mr. O encourages students to choose their own topic and to have personal investment or self-motivation in what they write much like how Canagarajah advocates for a personal rhetoric. Yet he still helps students adhere to the expectations of a native readership as Connor highlights to be necessary.

6.6 Student Strategies:

Oxford and Nyikos discovered that "The more motivated students used learning strategies of all kinds more often than did the less motivated students" (1989). Tony is a highly motivated student and used several different kinds of coping strategies in Mr. O's course. Of these Tony explicitly mentioned most frequently using the following strategies, "I go for help and I try to keep myself organized." Organization was one of the most used self-motivated strategies mentioned in Purdie and Oliver's (1999) research as well. Tony stays organized by using a school planner, as he was taught to do in his American high school experience, which he explains:

They give us a planner, the planner leaves a blank for every day's assignment and it also reminds you what's coming next, like homecoming, prom, some national holidays. So that's what I found was different in America, they plan for stuff. So I have my life planned out on the paper. I write down what I need to do, and I make time for what I want to do. That's really different.

Along side Tony's use of organization, his strategy of going for help from the teacher was consistently used. Tony mentioned that he would go frequently to lunch hours but infrequently to office hours. He preferred the social aspect of lunch hours versus the rigidity of office hours; he stated, "I don't really go to office hours. I don't even remember his office hours, but we have this habit where we both have lunch in the union immediately after class... So we talk about paper, we talk about all things we never mention in class or something just interesting stuff we have in our minds." So although this correlates to the research of Purdie and Oliver (1999) in which the student uses social strategies as a coping mechanism, it diverges from the research because he used this strategy the most. This is contradictory to the conclusion of the article, in which this strategy was used infrequently, due to its seeming lack of importance in relation to academic writing. However, it is important to note that in this particular situation, the student used a self-motivated, social medium of eating lunch with his instructor in order to further his ability in academic writing.

These two strategies of seeking out help and using organizational tools, were the means that Tony used to continue to meet both the expectations of Mr. O's course, but in school in general, and have been presented as coping mechanisms that highly motivated students use. However, when there was confusion about the expectations of Mr. O, or if

they were not met, Tony had a different set of strategies that he used in tandem with the strategies that he found most successful. Mr. O comments that, “He is willing to say when he just doesn’t get it and that at the very least is helpful.” Tony echoes this willingness to ask questions by stating, “If I don’t (understand) for the first time, they explain it. I can ask a deeper question so they can give examples of like go through some thoughts that I never thought about.” However, when these strategies did not work, and Tony found himself unable to mediate the expectations of Mr. O, he resorted to a very different means of coping, which resulted in a lack of motivation. He said “Don’t force me, if you force me to do something I’m just going to rebelling. I’m nineteen... this is reasonable!” Much as Chowdury and Phan Le Ha (2014) discussed, Tony is resisting the dominant discourse that has been imposed upon him in an English composition course. However, since Mr. O believes in support at all costs, this form of rebellious behavior was viewed as the student’s choice, and rather than forcing his student to conform, he supports his student’s decisions.

7. Implications

The implications that this research has are vast and compelling. First and foremost, this study discusses the necessity of teachers and students to not only agree upon the motivations and expectations of the course, but also to mediate them together in a discursive process. By mediating strategies students not only understand what is expected of them in a course, thus building a higher sense of self-motivation, but they have a say in their own agency as writers and they have the ability to construct their own perspectives. As Mr. O so eloquently stated, “I always find that rejoinder necessary, because if the student is just told ‘I didn’t understand your topic, or I don’t understand what you’re

trying to say.’ Then they don’t get a chance to respond, that just kills the mood entirely.” Essentially it derails students and the dominant western academic discourse strips them of their motivation and discourages them from having their own perspectives.

Therefore, it is essential for teachers, particularly of international students, to discuss expectations, and to do so frequently. Miscommunications can happen, and do happen, and may lead to a disjuncture in the expectations and loss of motivation from both teachers and students. Even when each discusses such expectations frequently (as did Mr. O and Tony), there may be cultural beliefs or practices that differ. Thus, it becomes necessary for teachers of international students to be as transparent as possible in such discussions. This will help students to not only navigate the course while meeting teacher expectations, but it will also enable students to gain invaluable motivational techniques and to learn academic conventions and expectations that may differ from their previous experiences.

In conclusion, this research discusses various strategies used by the teacher to help students cope in this new academic setting and by the student to meet the various expectations in higher education. The teacher participant volunteered much of his time to students as a means to help them succeed, and he used technology as a supplemental teaching tool to add a visual and permanent component to his class. He used encouragement in many forms to build his students motivations and to provide support for their writing endeavors. The student participant used organizational and social coping strategies, that have been recognized in highly motivated learners, to meet the expectations of his composition instructor, and was adamant about getting help from his teacher. He used a planner to organize his commitments and he used communication,

particularly of the humorous variety, in order to maintain his motivation in this course. In the few instances when the expectations of the two participants did not line up, the student's motivation suffered and he became more rebellious and fought against the academic constructs by which he found binding.

References:

- Andrade, M. (. (0001). International students in English-speaking universities : Adjustment factors (English). *Journal Of Research In International Education*, 5(2), 131-154.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. (2013). *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Chowdhury, R., & Phan, L. H. (2014). *Desiring TESOL and International Education : Market Abuse and Exploitation*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Connor, Ulla. (2011). *Intercultural rhetoric in the writing classroom*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Corbin, J. (1990). Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria. *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie : Zfs*,
- Dörnyei, Z., & Scott, M. L. (1997). Communication strategies in a second language: Definitions and taxonomies. *Language Learning*, 47(1), 173.
- Duff, P. A., & Uchida, Y. (1997). The Negotiation of Teachers' Sociocultural Identities and Practices in Postsecondary EFL Classrooms. *TESOL Quarterly*, (3). 451.
- Gairín, J., Feixas, M., Franch, J., Guillamón, C. y Quinquer, D., Elementos para la elaboración de planes de tutoría en la Universidad. *Contextos Educativos*, 6-7 (2003-2004), 21-42.
- Gobo, G. (2011). Glocalizing methodology? The encounter between local methodologies. *International Journal Of Social Research Methodology*, 14(6), 417-437.
- Hofstede, G. (1986). Cultural differences in teaching and learning. *International Journal of intercultural relations*, 10(3), 301-320.
- Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2008). Bridging the Gap in Expectations between International Students and Academic Staff. *Journal Of Studies In International Education*, 12(2), 204-221.
- Mawhinney, H., & Xu, F. (1997). Reconstructing the Professional Identity of Foreign-Trained Teachers in Ontario Schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, (3). 632.
- Oxford, R., & Nyikos, M. (1989). Variables Affecting Choice of Language Learning Strategies by University Students. *The Modern Language Journal*, (3). 291.
- Purdie, N. & Oliver, R. (1999) Language learning strategies used by bilingual school-aged children. *Elsevier Science Ltd*. 27. 375-388.
- Ramsay, S., Jones, E., & Barker, M. (2007). Relationship Between Adjustment and Support Types: Young and Mature-aged Local and International First Year University Students. *Higher Education*, 54(2), 247-265.
- Shaughnessy, M. (1977). Some Needed Research on Writing. *College Composition and Communication*, (4). 317.
- Shaughnessy, M. P. (1976). Diving In: An Introduction to Basic Writing. In V. p. Villanueva, K. p. Arola (Eds.) , *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory: A Reader* (pp. 291-297). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.
- Sook Lee, J. & Oxelson, E. (2006). 'It's Not My Job': K-12 Teacher Attitudes toward Students' Heritage Language Maintenance. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 30, 453-477. *TESOL Quarterly*, (2). 427.
- Wong, J. K. (2004). Are the Learning Styles of Asian International Students Culturally or Contextually Based?. *International Education Journal*, 4(4), 154-166.